The High Desert Museum

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Basque Sheepherding

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While Basques were involved in the early Spanish exploration and subsequent administration of parts of the American West, their discernible presence in the region dates from the California gold rush in 1849. By that time Basques were already established as sheepherders on the pampas of southern South America, many of whom joined the ranks of fortune-seekers to North America.

When most failed to find gold they turned their attention to livestock-raising. By the 1870s the first Basque herders had expanded their operations from cattle to sheep and

had reached out from the seemingly vast open ranges of southern California into the bunchgrass rangeland and mountain meadows of the high desert country, an expansive region of the Intermountain West bordered generally by the Cascade Mountains on the west, the Rockies on the east, the Sierra Nevadas on the south, and the Columbia Plateau on the north. The high desert landscape is characterized largely by basin and range country as well as arid plateaus.

Sheepherding was a denigrated occupation in the American West. However, it required no knowledge of English and little formal education. What was more, it provided economic opportunity for ambitious men.

Most of the Basque men who tended itinerant bands of sheep in the High Desert considered their isolated life in the harsh and often hostile landscape only a temporary sojourn. Unlike immigrants who settled in urban ethnic ghettoes or American small towns dominated by their own ethnic group, the young Basque entered one of the loneliest professions in the world. Herding sheep in the least populated reaches of the American West placed a man in a situation which at times bordered on total social isolation. In such a context there were formidable barriers to the formation of family life and assimilation into the American mainstream. Consequently, Basques, possibly more than any other immigrant group in American history, retained an orientation to their homeland. They viewed their stay as a kind of purgatory in which to acquire one's nest egg (built on monthly wages of between $30-$40) before returning to France or Spain.

One common but erroneous assumption about the Basques is that every immigrant from the Pyrenees had an extensive background in shepherding. In point of fact there were few professional herders in the Basque Country itself and, ironically, practically none of them moved to the United States. Rather, what young Basque males brought to America was a rural upbringing that gave them some skill in caring for livestock, a propensity for hard work, and a willingness to undergo extreme hardship in order to advance financially. It was primarily in the High Desert, under the tutelage of an experienced herder, that the new arrivals learned how to herd sheep.

Basques were in the forefront of developing the pattern of transhumance which still characterizes sheep husbandry throughout much of the American West. Under this system of seasonal livestock movement, the sheep bands are winterized in low-lying deserts, which are largely free from crippling snowfalls. They are summered in the high country of the Sierra Nevadas (in California and Nevada), the Sawtooths (in Idaho), the Bighorns (in Wyoming), and many other regional mountain ranges.

Transhumance could also be practiced by established landed ranch outfits, but it did not really require such investment. As long as there was ample public range available, theoretically on a first-come basis, a man could move perpetually about the public lands caring for as many as 1,000 ewes and their lambs, accompanied only by a pack animal and a sheep dog. By the turn of the century such nomadic outfits, "tramps" to their detractors, were common throughout the American West. In several districts the competition between settled ranchers and transient sheep operators, mainly Basques, led to litigation in the counts, anti-Basque sentiment in the press and even violence.

Beginning in the late 1890s and during the first decade of the 20th century, vast forested districts of the American West were either declared national parks (in which livestock grazing was prohibited) or national forests (in which livestock grazing permits were issued to American citizens and according to how much ranch land they held in

private ownership). Both measures were touted in the region's press as victories over the "Basque tramp sheepmen."

The immediate practical consequence of these public policy changes was to further concentrate the transient bands onto the public range outside the reserves, some of which was still suitable as marginal summer range. In the unprotected districts, the problems that the reserve system was designed to address were simply exacerbated. It took nearly three decades, or until 1934 with passage of the Taylor Grazing Act, that the remaining unforested parts of the public lands were brought under effective federal control. The era of the nomadic Basque sheep band was over.

While many of the Basque herders continued returning to Europe, by the turn of the century Basques in expanding numbers began to view the region as a permanent home. They increasingly took their wages in breeding stock, or they used their wages to purchase shares of the flock they tended. They started purchasing ranches in order to continue operating under the new federal policies. They became full or part owners—sheepmen—and continued the practice of bringing younger relatives over from the Pyrenees as herders. Growing numbers obtained U.S. citizenship, and trips to the homeland began taking the form of temporary visits, often with the primary purpose of finding a wife to return with them to America.

Over time, Basque sheepmen established themselves in close-knit communities such as Jordan Valley, Oregon, Mountain Home, Idaho, and Elko or Winnemucca, Nevada. Having already firmly built their reputation as the best sheepherders, Basques progressively increased their prominence in the ranks of camptenders, sheep foremen, livestock buyers, ranch owners and livestock transporters.

The nature of shepherding, until well into the 20th century, made it an occupation primarily for the young and unmarried, many with little command of English and in need of a place to find companionship and shelter. To serve the needs of these sheepherders, Basque boarding houses became a dominant enterprise and support mechanism in their communities. The owner of the boarding house served as interpreter, postmaster, medical advisor, and business consultant for Basque newcomers to the High Desert. Boarding houses also provided traditional music, held dances, and constructed *pelota* and *jai alai* courts for their patrons, making them the focus of social life in many Basque communities.

By the early years of the 20th century, successful Basque entrepreneurs were expanding their interests into mercantile and baking enterprises. In subsequent years, the work ethic, business integrity and success of Basques in a wide variety of walks of life resulted in their being viewed in the region as one of its unique cultural and economic assets. At the same time, leaders within the High Desert's Basque community began to promote special events and festivals celebrating Basque culture, and a body of literature on the Basque experience in the region began to emerge.

The combination of the closure of the public lands to itinerant sheepmen and the restrictive immigration laws severely curtailed the American West as a viable destination for intending Basque emigrants. By the 1940s, in part due to the manpower shortage occasioned by World War II, the sheep industry was experiencing a severe labor crisis. To help remedy this situation, the U.S. Congress passed a series of "Sheepherder Laws" conferring permanent residence on Basques who were herding sheep as illegal aliens, as

well as a series of enabling acts which exempted intending herders from the Spanish nationals' quota.

About that time sheepmen created the Western Range Association, the sole purpose of which was to recruit herders (mainly in Spain) for three-year labor contracts in the American West. From 1950 until the mid-1970s the system worked reasonably well, introducing several thousand sojourning Basques into the United States. However, a combination of the struggle over access to the public lands between ranchers and environmentalists, which further limited the livestock grazing permits, and the improved economic condition in the Basque country, which made a sheepherder's wage unattractive, reduced the demand for herders while shifting the recruiting efforts of the Western Range Association toward Latin America (Mexico, Peru and Chile). By the mid-1970s there were fewer than 100 Basque sheepherders in the entire American West. At the same time, many Basque ranchers either sold out or converted from sheep to cattle. After a century and a half of serving as one of the prime architects of the rural economy of the American West, the era of the Basque sheepman (defined broadly) was all but over.